

SOMETIMES YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT KNOWING

INHERITED



BRIAN LANCASTER

FIVE

MONTICIANO

Alice is relieved to hear I am staying with friends. Emergency services descended on Callico House, she tells me with a hint of a smile in her voice, because the moment Edward learnt of my permanent departure, he arranged for someone to come and change the locks but decided he could single-handedly change the code for the house alarm. In doing so, he set off the whole system. After being besieged by police and alarm engineers, he conceded that in future, he would defer to the security company for any issues with the system. I don't say anything to Alice, but I still think three squad cars for a tripped alarm seems excessive.

"I'm not going to the funeral, Alice," I say, after a lull in the conversation and before she has a chance to bring up the subject. "I'll mourn Albert in my own way, in my own time."

"I understand," she says, after a soft sigh, "and I think it's probably for the best all round. I know I'm being totally selfish, but I could have done with your company to help me get through the day. Edward will be busy sucking up to VIPs and relatives. I'd hoped you might turn up anyway and cause a

scene, telling them you were his lover and shaken awake all those entitled, homophobic pricks. And with you there, I'd have had an excuse not to be hanging off his arm all day. But I understand and I think, if I were in your shoes, I would do the same."

I tell her I've had problems with my phone but will text her once I get the device fixed. Nishan pulls up my message history on his laptop and says he will be able to correspond in my stead, just in case. Anything complicated, he will contact me once I let him know my cell number in Italy.

Even with beer, good food and a significant buzz, I barely slept that night.

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With a seat booked on a coach leaving Victoria coach station early the following day, I embark on the longest journey of my remembered life. I arrive in Brussels early evening, with just enough time to buy a ticket for Florence departing the following morning.

Everything seems to be leaning in my favour until I realise I have nowhere to stay overnight. Instead of booking a hostel or a cheap hotel, I wander the streets for hours. In the memory I still own, I believe I have never been abroad, and yet many of the rues and avenues are strangely familiar. Josh would call it *déjà vu*.

Albert used to scoff when I used the term and told me those rare occurrences are instances of dual neurological processing. He explained that it happens as a result of two signals in the brain processing the same information—such as a place or a person—but not synchronising correctly, thus creating two separate experiences. The second, slightly delayed signal, becomes a memory of the first. To this day, I

don't wholly buy into his scientific reasoning. Familiarity strikes me at odd moments accompanied by sensory recollections—smells or tastes or sounds—and I wonder if hidden memories are being released.

No doubt Josh has told Nishan by now about me being involved in a hi-speed train crash in northwest England fifteen years ago—big news at the time. According to news stories, vandals had dragged concrete breeze blocks onto the tracks. The derailed train hurtled down an embankment and collided with two parked petrol tankers, creating a flaming inferno. Forty-three people died that day, many of the bodies unidentifiable. I had been sitting towards the back of the train, found with only a train ticket on me but no record of my identity. Despite posters in police stations, no parents, guardians, or anyone else came forward to claim a missing child, which is why I ended up in foster care. Authorities estimated my age at the time and, somewhat sombrely, gave my date of birth as the day and month of the crash.

My first foster mother, Bertha, a religious woman who saw the police photograph of me from the hospital grounds standing against a brick wall, said I looked like an angel, which is why she somewhat unimaginatively named me Gabriel Redbrick. After MRIs, scans, and neurological and cognitive tests, the doctors confirmed that I had retrograde amnesia but was otherwise in good mental shape. And whoever had raised me before the accident had kept me in excellent physical health.

The police discovered from CCTV that I had boarded the train alone at London Euston and paid for the ticket to Glasgow Central in cash. My earliest memory is waking in a hospital bed. According to the police and other survivors, I

had been sitting at a window seat and thrown through a shattered window.

And now Brussels is unearthing more latent memories. Had I visited before? By luck or foreknowledge, I find my way to a twenty-four-hour cafe near the coach station, where I nurse a huge coffee and a limp baguette of cheese and lettuce. In the early hours, I amble along to the coach station, find a metal seat in the waiting areas to rest on, determined to stay awake.

I don't think I have ever felt this isolated, not even during those homeless dark days on the streets around the back of King's Cross Station. At least then, I had other lost souls to share in the adversity. Not that being alone evokes any negative feelings. I am alive and more focused when I only need to concentrate on my own survival.

For the next leg of the trip, apart from getting out during the few pitstops to stretch my legs, eat food and use the conveniences, I doze and barely notice the countryside flashing past.

As instructed by Nishan, I pick up a SIM in the coach station at Florence and immediately fire off an email to the unique number he gave me. I luck out at the bus station, finding a ticket seller who speaks perfect English. She not only books me onto two connecting buses heading straight into the heart of Monticiano that will get me there in less than three hours but directs me to the first that is leaving in fifteen minutes. Arriving in the heart of Monticiano, stiff and dog tired, I finally decided to splash out on a taxi.

"Stop at the end of the lane," I tell the local taxi driver, who, remarkably, also speaks some English. His neckless head swings around, and he glowers at me as though I have lost my wits.

We are, after all, in the middle of nowhere. Even though

I don't know him from Adam, I don't want to give away my final destination to anyone. Maybe I'm being paranoid, but life has been anything but ordinary of late. Instead, I pay the man and drag my heavy rucksack onto the dusty track. Not a minute too soon, either. Stale sweat and cigarette smoke infested the air and the fabric of his back seat, adding faint nausea to my underlying travel fatigue.

As he revs the engine and drives off, I stroll over to the grass border, at the entrance of a much older and dustier route than the main road's fresh tarmac. Fixing the rucksack onto my back, I take a deep cleansing breath and lurch off down the way.

The weather in early September is life-affirming, warm as a working kitchen, the skies an endless blue, the early afternoon light burning from overhead, radiant and healing. Apart from the occasional tyre tread on the dusty trail, the panoramic countryside is timeless, unchanged for centuries, if not millennia. Finally, here I am in central Italy, tramping through orchards in the Tuscan countryside, on the outskirts of Monticiano, solving the first part of Albert's riddle.

Back in London, I used to survive by the satellite-connected map and GPS apps on my phone to get me to any destination. Today, I set off down the avenue with the aid of a folded, laminated road map of Florence and Tuscany, a tatty Lonely Planet guide book Nishan plucked from their bookshelf, already ten years out of date. The pair also furnished me with a compass, a Swiss army knife, and a box of six peanut and chocolate energy bars. I feel not so much liberated as exiled.

Oddly enough, I am no longer tired. One upside to travelling in this post-pandemic age is that many people are still not entirely confident about vaccines or health regimes

abroad and have delayed their travel plans. Travelling has been relatively seamless. From Brussels to Florence—the longest part of my journey—not only did I have a double seat to myself, but nobody sat in front or behind.

Either side of the lane are well-ordered olive groves, unkempt trees so unique with their leaves and branches appearing windswept, almost as distinctive on the Tuscan landscape as the wild Cypress trees, Roman centurion spears pointing to the skies. And I also recognise odours in the air, the smell of lavender and an aching familiar scent, a herb Mrs Buckland often uses for cooking. Rosemary perhaps?

According to my guidebook, *Pensione Galli* stands halfway between here and my destination. I only hope the small guest house still exists. I tried calling from Florence using my new phone, but the number kept ringing. I read that many smaller hotels shut their doors for good during the plague, some disappearing overnight. If that's the case, I will need a change of plan. Not that sleeping rough in the shell of a house would bother me as long as there is some form of shelter. In London, I slept in shop doorways or underpasses. If the night is as balmy as the day, I'd be happy to sleep in the open, but according to my guide, sunny days in Tuscany are often followed by thunderstorms at night. Fortunately, Josh allowed me to borrow his lightweight one-man tent in camouflage green and his inflatable pillow, both items hanging from my rucksack.

Another twenty minutes later, and around one gentle curve in the lane, an old building appears on the right, tucked back from the main route. Outside the main entrance, set in the shade of lemon trees, are unoccupied tables and chairs in sturdy wrought iron. As I approach, I notice the front door standing open, a sign above

surrounded by ivy announcing Pensione Galli. Two windows with closed shutters sit on the upper level even though those on the ground level are open. I notice a lone motorcycle, a stylish black BMW, propped against the wall in the shade. By now, I am beginning to regret not wearing a hat. The midday sun is unrelenting, and I welcome the promise of cool shade offered by the inn's interior.

Once I step across the threshold, my eyes take time to adjust to the gloom. In front of me, there is what appears to be a cramped reception desk constructed beneath a staircase, currently unattended. A wooden glass-fronted rifle cabinet stands up against the wall containing five assorted rifles, the door thankfully locked with a large padlock. When I turn to my right, where the stairway begins, there are wooden framed double doors with glass panes through which there appears to be a small, currently empty dining room.

I hear raised voices and head to a small entrance to the left of the reception desk. There I find a narrow and dreary but well-stocked barroom, with assorted bottles on haphazardly placed wooden shelves, the same teak wood as the countertop. Three men are seated at the counter, one on his mobile phone. A fourth man—the pensione owner, I assume—stands behind the bar. As I hover in the doorway, the tall, gangly man sitting in the middle spots me and nods to the guy drying a glass. Unsmiling, the barman flips the tea towel over his shoulder and shrugs at me.

"Oh, er, mi scusi," I say, dropping my rucksack, digging out my Lonely Planet and reciting a phrase I learnt during the coach trip. "Parla inglese?"

With a shake of his head, he turns to the other men and mutters something in Italian, causing them to laugh coarsely. I assume this means I must converse using my

limited Italian phrase list. If only Albert were here. He could speak five languages, not particularly fluent in any, but Albert was the kind of person who considered having a rudimentary understanding of many languages a means of survival as well as basic manners. I stare down at my guidebook and rattle off the next one.

"Vor—vorrei pren—prenotare una camera per due notti."

I hope I have just asked to book a room for two nights. One of the men snorts and mutters something, which is when I actually notice the man at the far end of the bar. Head covered by a dirty grey hoodie and bent forward over his beer glass, his black hair is greasy and overlong, covering his face. The hoodie sleeves are pushed up to his elbows, revealing tanned and hairy forearms, one encased down to his fingertips in a tattooed sleeve. Both large hands clamp around his glass. I can't make out his face but sense something innately threatening about his presence. Another skill I have picked up, and I have no idea how or when—maybe from my time on the streets—but I can instantly differentiate harmless punks with attitude from their quietly capable but dangerous doppelgängers. This man falls comfortably into the latter type. When he tilts his head slightly to stare my way, an ice-cold shiver passes through me, and I quickly rip my gaze away.

Just then, the older man nearest finishes his call and turns in his seat. Overweight and sweating in the humid afternoon, he appears out of place, decked out in clean sandy-coloured chinos, a crisp white shirt and shiny brown leather shoes.

"You have not already booked the room?"

I am sure he hears the small sigh of relief that escapes me.

"I tried calling. Nobody picked up."

After I answer, the man translates for everyone and, this time, everyone except the barman laughs. I am completely ignored for a few minutes as they carry on a conversation.

"So you want to book a room now?" asks the man.

"Yes."

"Why do you come here? To Monticiano?"

"To view a property."

"Which property?"

Why does this start to feel like an interrogation? Albert used to say Italians can be direct, unlike the British, who tend to be more circumspect in the hope of appearing polite or less threatening.

"It's called Eagle House in English. In Italian, I think it's—"

"Casa dell'Aquila?"

Although I gaze at this man, I sense them all turn to stare at me.

"Yes. Do you know where that is?"

Once again, the nearest man converses with the barman, but this time they include the surly shadow at the end of the bar. Without looking up, he fires off something in a deep voice.

"Who are you?" asks the usual man, and finally, my temper bristles.

"Mi chiamo, Gabriel, Gabriel Redbrick," I reply, using another stock phrase I have memorised. "Come ti chiami?"

If he wants my name, he can damn well be polite enough to give me his.

"I am Carlo Romano. Doctor Romano," he says, holding out his hand and smiling and making me feel like a complete asshole. "I am the local medical doctor."

"You have an interesting surgery here," I add, shaking his hand and looking around the room. At least he has the good

nature to laugh at my attempt at a joke. When he translates for them, the barman finally grunts out a laugh.

"This is a home visit," explains the doctor. "Signora Galli is unwell upstairs. Can I ask, are you expected at Casa dell'Aquila?"

"No, I— This is very last minute."

"But you know professore Albert Callico? The owner."

The fact he knows Albert is a relief. But they clearly have no idea what happened to him.

"I am—was—his close friend. His life partner. He was in a serious motorway accident a few weeks back. One I'm afraid he did not survive. You had not heard?"

"Professore Callico is dead?" asks the doctor, clearly taken aback.

"Yes. He died in an accident on the motorway."

Once again, the man translates. This time, I sense a tension in the room as all eyes are again on me. The doctor emphasises a particular word or phrase and, this time, all of them, even the man at the end of the bar, his dark eyes glaring at me with something indecipherable. I am about to supplement my reply, but my gaze is drawn away by the barman, who has pushed a glass of ice-cold beer my way.

"For you," he says. I reach for the wallet inside my jacket, but the man shakes his head decisively. Okay, so maybe these locals are not so bad after all. Nodding my thanks, I down the beer in a few grateful gulps, much to the audience's amusement, and a chuckle from the barman.

"La Signora Bellacci takes care of Casa dell'Aquila," says the doctor as I place the glass back. "You should go to meet her first. Before you decide if you need a room here."

"You mean there's someone looking after the site?"

"Of course. And she speaks English. In fact, tell her I'll be dropping by to see her at around seven-thirty. If you still

prefer to come back here for a room, I can bring you in my car."

"Thank you, Doctor Romano. That's very kind of you. And thank you for the beer. I'll leave you all to your—um—business."

As I head for the inn door, I hear a collective chuckle behind me. I have no idea what they're saying about me inside or even if I am the source of their merriment. But neither do I care. Out in the open air, I breathe a huge lungful of fresh air and then release a sigh of relief. Adjusting the backpack, I put my head down and trudge onward.

Thirty minutes down the meandering track, I finally see signs of habitation come into view in the distance. However, the building appears to be a newer structure, possibly a renovation, fenced off by colossal, well-groomed hedgerows on either side of tall metal gates of ornate patterned black metal. As I approach, the building becomes more evident, a beautiful, classical Italian country-style villa, painstakingly renovated. I wonder absently if Albert realised he had a neighbour.

I start to get confused when the lane appears to come to an end at the house. I am checking to see if the small overgrown dirt track leading off to the left leads anywhere when a woman's voice comes from the house grounds.

"Mr Redbrick? Are you Mr Redbrick?" she calls as one side of the automatic gate clicks and opens inwards. When I turn to meet her, she is not unfriendly exactly but appears a little suspicious. In her early sixties, by my estimation, she carries more weight than is probably healthy and wears a white apron over a plain grey dress with matching espadrilles. Her hair is dyed black and tied back by a simple white scarf. If not for the bronzed Italian glow on her skin,

she would not look out of place in a nunnery. Clearly, one of the men at the pensione has called to tell her I am on my way.

"I am. And you must be Mrs Bellacci. I'm looking for Eagle House."

"Yes," she says but offers nothing else.

"Can you point me in the right direction?"

"Here is Casa dell'Aquila."

"This is—?" I begin, stepping back, surprised, looking up at the grand structure. There is absolutely nothing about the building resembling the bomb site I was expecting. And from the facade, there are no signs of building works. Confused, I shrug out of my backpack and pull the envelope containing photos from the side pocket. When I move over to show her, tapping a finger at the picture of the derelict structure Hammond-Clyde gave me, her stern features finally transform with amusement.

"Yes, this is taken when the professore first saw the house. I helped oversee the restoration which finally completed in July. Do you have identification?"

I stall a moment, trying to assess everything this woman has said. Eventually, I catch up, fish out my passport and show the document to her. After checking a few pages, she finally hands my only form of identity back to me.

"Yes, Mr Redbrick," she says, stepping out of the way. "Casa dell'Aquila. Welcome to your home. Would you like me to show you around?"